



By Hadley Ferguson

the Flock!

Don't put yourself out on a limb. Build a professional learning network and watch links, blog posts, and other resources come to you.

A year ago, I had no idea what a PLN was. Before I built my professional learning network, I did all my learning by myself. If I needed to understand something for a new unit, I researched it on my own. That was before I discovered Twitter, the virtual meeting place where your PLN comes together.

A PLN is a community of individuals around the world who are learning together. They can start out as strangers, people you couldn't pick out in a crowded room. But Twitter helps these strangers come together to create a community built on communication and collaboration dedicated to making learning and education the best it can be.

Take Time to Build Your Community

The first thing to know is that developing a PLN on Twitter takes a commitment—not necessarily a huge one, but it does take some time. It is a bit like starting a new friendship: You cultivate a relationship by chatting over coffee in the faculty room or sharing an anecdote in the hall. It is the kind of commitment that causes you to pause rather than walk on, and that's what it will take to develop and maintain a PLN using Twitter.

The amount of time you set aside to build your PLN depends on you. It can be 10 minutes a day or an hour on a Saturday, but it is necessary, or you will never begin to learn from the people you are following.

As with any process, it can be broken down into several steps:

Set up your account. Once you sign up for a free account on Twitter, you'll be asked to write a 140-character bio and post a photo. It is important that you have a photo or avatar rather than simply the Twitter-bird default. That image makes you more real to your PLN. Also, make sure that you include in your bio what you are interested in, as people who are deciding whether to follow you will look at that to get a sense of what you care about. Mine reads: "History teacher, tech enthusiast, lifelong learner, Mom and Grandmom."

Learn to follow. Following someone requires nothing more than clicking the Follow button. Twitter then notifies that person that you are following him or her. It's a bit like offering a compliment. It means that you are interested in what he or she thinks. Generally, they will check out your profile and decide whether they want to follow you too.

When the people you follow post something, it shows up in your Twitter stream. Choose people you want to learn from. I look for educators, history teachers, and middle school teachers. You can search for a person you know in the Twitter search box, or you can search for keywords and find people who are interested in the same topics. Check out the person

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by reading the bio under the picture. Some people include their hometowns, their favorite sports, or their hobbies. Look for people you share a common interest with, whether it's an enthusiasm for baseball, lifelong learning, or ed tech.

I have one Twitter account set up for my professional development and one for my personal interests. That way, when I want to learn about teaching and new ideas about education, I go to my twitter.com/hadleyjf account. When I want to hear from the president or learn what is happening in Philadelphia, I go to twitter.com/hadleyvana. For me, there is too much information to have only one account.

Tap into great lists. A good way to find people to follow is to check out the lists that other people create. A few of my favorites from fellow educators are: Shelly Terrell (<http://twitter.com/ShellTerrell>), Paula White, (<http://twitter.com/PaulaWhite>), Tom Whitby (<http://twitter.com/tomwhitby>), and Milton Ramirez (<http://twitter.com/tonnet>). They have identified people who are committed to learning and growing in a Web 2.0 world. Choose as many people as you want from their lists and begin to follow them.

Watch and listen. The wonderful thing about Twitter is that you can simply follow people and not say a word. Just read the tweets, click on links to blogs, and learn. There is no need to put yourself into the conversation until you are ready to be visible. You can spend hours and days lurking without tweeting anything. You never need to be the awkward person at a party, standing on the outside of a group, listening in, and wishing you could participate. On Twitter, all of the conversation comes to you. You are invited in from the start. The level of participation is up to you.

Very quickly, you will begin to find links to interesting blog posts or new tools for the classroom. It is a forum where educators post what they are thinking and what they stumble upon.

Give generously. The next step is to move beyond simply taking from the Twitter stream and start retweeting. When you retweet someone's post, it shows up in the stream of the person who posted it. That person "sees" you and will often thank you for sending his idea along. He may have no idea how many followers you have. He only knows that you liked what he posted. Often that person, or someone who follows him, will start to follow you, and you will begin to build your own following. The more you retweet, the more people will begin to follow you, because you will have made yourself visible to the PLN world.



Enhance Your Twitter Experience

Using a few tips and tools, you can transform your teaching and become a wise owl.

I have been encouraging teachers, students, and others to join Twitter and build their personal learning networks (PLNs) ever since I delved into this great social networking site last fall. Investing the time in Twitter has paid off in a number of wonderful ways. If it weren't for Twitter,

Ruggero Domenichini from New Zealand would not have taught my seventh grade Technology and Information Literacy class about his Web 2.0 tool, YouTellYou; Mark Moran, founder and CEO of findingDulcinea, wouldn't have taught my students and other teachers about his unbelievable online resource; our junior high students would not have participated in the award-winning Greetings-FromTheWorld wiki; and I wouldn't be as excited to go to ISTE 2010 in Denver (June 27-30) to see all of the amazing people I have come to know through their tweets.

Once you feel comfortable becoming part of the conversation, you might want to add a comment before retweeting the link or comment. Do this by typing something such as “Yes!” or “Gr8 idea” before you retweet. As you do this, you show yourself a bit more. If you want to remain invisible and simply learn without commenting, you can do that, but if you want to enter the conversation, then these are small steps to build your confidence. You can simply add “Good idea” with little concern that you might make a mistake, though from my experience, the educators who take time to have conversations on Twitter rarely point out mistakes. Even when there is disagreement, it is generally in the context of trying to provide the best for kids.

Expose yourself. This is where it can get a little scary, because the next steps require you to begin to expose yourself and your thinking. You can do a tremendous amount of learning without going any further, but there is so much more available if you share your ideas with the people who are now following you. Begin by tweeting the links to tools and sites that you find in your daily work as an educator. If you read a good article, copy the link and send it out. If you use a tool effectively, tweet about it. “Used Wallwisher with 8th grade today. Loved it.” You will develop the habit of including your PLN in your thinking. The wonderful part about having only 140 characters is that there isn’t much room to make a fool of yourself. And if you do, as I have, it passes quickly and no one remembers.

Tag your tweet. Using a hashtag—another word for the pound sign (#)—in your tweet will give it even more exposure. A hashtag will add it to the streams of the educators who follow that hashtag. Some of the education hashtags I find useful are #teachers, #educators, #web20, and #pln. When you add a hashtag to your post, more people will see what you are sharing.

At this point, you may find yourself becoming addicted to Twitter and to conversations with your PLN. Using Twitter to tap into my PLN has made my teaching suddenly come alive. I have discovered people who wanted to help me succeed or help me figure out what went wrong. When I have a question, I turn to my PLN and wait to hear back. It may seem like 140 characters does not allow enough room to communicate, but those few characters connect me to blogs and websites. Over time, I have built relationships with people I know only by their photos or avatars, but they are real people to me nonetheless. I look for them in my stream of tweets and recognize them as they scroll by. They are my PLN, and I am part of theirs. So join the flow of ideas and learning and watch it change how you see yourself as a teacher and your students as learners.



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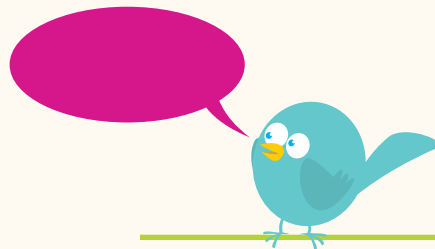
~~Once you start using Twitter, you'll start reaping benefits such as these. For those who have opened up an account and dabbled a bit but still don't see the point, I'd like to offer a few other tools and tips that can improve your Twitter experience.~~

Use a Twitter Organizer

~~Add a Twitter organizer or manager to your desktop such as TweetDeck (www.tweetdeck.com) or HootSuite (<http://hootsuite.com>). I prefer TweetDeck because I find it easier to use. Both of these tools organize your Twitter stream into columns, such as~~

~~All Friends, Mentions, Direct Messages, or any special lists or searches you follow. You can open as many columns as you want, and you can delete them at any time. I often have several columns open for my favorite lists.~~

~~Twitter users create discussion forums using a hashtag (#) followed by the topic. This allows you to search all of the tweets containing that hashtag, even if you aren't following the person who sent the tweet. For example, when I compose a tweet and include my school's hashtag, anyone searching for #vanmeter will see this tweet. It is a great way to share and connect~~



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